[Theme music ‘Some Spooky Sh*t Is Going On Here’ by Theo Goodwin plays.]

INTRO

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The Underwood Collection, Episode One: Prima Donna

[Tape recorder clicks on. Tape static is heard continually throughout.]

ULYSSES

Okay. Sure. Is this thing on?

(Beat.) Alright, looks like we’re rolling.

A couple of folks from the Magnus Institute told me I’d need one of these eventually— apparently their boss, Jack— or... something— I think he was around when I was a researcher there— uses a tape for some of the more stubborn statements, which I’m beginning to understand. The advice was much appreciated, but didn’t make sense to me until this thing—

[Papers rustle.]

—corrupted its own file three times and nearly broke the computer when I tried to save it. So. Tape recorder it is. This guy just really doesn't want to be taken down, it seems, but here we are.

Also, Morgan, I love you, but if this piece of junk breaks halfway through my recording, the statement simply will not be going in the archives. Sorry.

Statement of Aisha Lacombe, regarding the death of their friend, Emmett Long. Original statement taken 17th February, 1998. Recording by UC Bamba, Assistant Curator of the Usher Foundation, Washington DC.

Statement Begins.

Everyone said to stay out of the Marisol Theater. They said it was falling apart, that you were likely to get yourself killed if you went in there. They said that it was a fire hazard, that sometimes rough crowds hung out in the ruins.

Emmett and I had heard all of it, but no words ever coupled with the Marisol Theater as much as the hushed intonation of "*Prima Donna.*" The story had become as warped and twisted as the wood and steel frame of the theatre, but everyone knew their own version by heart. And so we knew ours.

It had all started in the sixties, of course, when the Marisol Theater was forty years young, still full of life and potential, and there was no one so full of life and potential within it as Gaelle Wallis. She, a young ballerina renowned within the area for her grace and beauty, became a darling of the

Marisol's stage, bathed in flowers and applause every night as she wove and unraveled her body.

Praise and acclaim do little to assuage the ego, unfortunately, and it's said the dear starlet let the fame go to her head, turning her passion into a frenzy. It's said that she worked her backup dancers to the bone until their feet bled, soaking their shoes and staining the stage crimson. It's said that her obsession led to her christening as the "Prima Donna of the Marisol." It's said that one night, the exhausted ensemble finally refused to perform any longer, hours before the premiere of the show that would bring sweet Gaelle international fame.

Tortured by ambition, it's said that the enraged dancer went on a backstage crusade, attacking her protesting accompaniment. No one knows how the fire started, but when all was said and done, the remnants of the Marisol Theater were all that remained, forlorn against the wind as it carried the ashes of a promising theatre and the careers of a dozen ballerinas, including the dear Gaelle Wallis, who became known to the locals simply as the Prima Donna.

The husk of the theatre and a warped legend was the sum of the whole affair. Too expensive to restore and too "historic" to demolish, the charred remains of awning and filigree stood rotting in the midst of a town that didn't know how to move on. Once a source of local pride, it now became a canvas for graffiti art and a festering ground for broken glass bottles and fast food wrappers.

It was a sore spot for many of the older residents in the town, but Emmett and I were younger than most, and our passion for mystery and truth was

far stronger than the confines of history's sting. We'd never been inside the Marisol before, but oh, how we would linger within the sight of the dusty façade, taking pictures of the ruins and running fingers along the smudged windowsill.

It was something of a fascination for Emmett. He and I had been friends for nearly five years at that time, and it was the sort of friendship where you tend to notice longing looks directed toward the shadowed remains of an old building.

That all changed in just one night, almost by accident and purely by chance.

It was after a night of drinking, when we were walking by the cracked remains of the theater. All of a sudden, something stopped Emmett dead in his tracks, mid-step. I asked him what was wrong.

"Do you hear that?" he said. He had an odd look on his face, somewhere between enraptured and deeply unsettled. We both fell quiet, listening, and surely enough, drifting in the warm breeze, was the slightest strains of music.

It was faint, the music. A curious sort of classical melody. I wasn't any type of expert and couldn't say for certain what it was, but I did recognize the high, clear song of a violin, floating from within the ruins of the Marisol Theater. When I looked at Emmett, he had already turned towards the crumbling theater, and had begun to walk towards it.

I should have stopped him, but I'd be lying if I said my own curiosity wasn't piqued. We edged around the sunken chain-link fence that encircled the

theatre, and glass crunched under my shoes as I went up to the opaque glass of the windowed door, attempting to peer in and puzzle out who was inside. All I could see was a vast, empty darkness. Still the music played.

It was strange, the music. The drug dealers that sometimes set up temporary shop within the theatre weren't the type to play classical, and the same could be said for the odd teenager completing a dare. Was someone practicing away from prying eyes and ears?

The mystery stretched on when we saw the broken lock and the limp chains on the ground by the door that once had been firmly shut. Emmett gave it a gentle push and sent the glass door creaking open. He crept softly into the dusty foyer, and I followed him as light from the streetlamps cast a pointed glow on the faded tile within. His head was cocked to the side, still listening to the music as he followed it, venturing towards the heavy double doors of the theater. They were still open, still flush against the wall, as if a panicked crowd had flung them aside in order to escape unforgiving flames.

Still the music played.

All was dark, from the stage to the rows upon rows of red velvet seats, the emptiness so heavy it left shadows. I found myself treading lightly across the crusted plush of the carpet as he made his way towards the darkened stage and it loomed before us. Something about the air, a crisp coolness so unlike the balmy weather outside, chilled me.

And still the music played.

I trailed behind Emmett as he slunk his way backstage, still craning his ear to try and follow the music. It came from everywhere: from the cobweb-wreathed rafters to the folds of endless rows of swaying velvet curtains.

It was dark, too dark, and I could barely make out his silhouette as the violin's melody quickened, growing louder, rising to a crescendo, and it was only when I began to speak that a deep, far-off click echoed from the front, like the sound of a stage light switching on.

Even from backstage, I could see the halo of light, and the odd, twisting shadows that flickered across it. Emmett saw it too, and snuck towards it. I followed farther behind him and silently peered from the wings, taking refuge in the curtains as our eyes adjusted to the new surroundings.

The stage, which had previously been dark and motionless, was now ablaze with a crisp, clear brightness that shone so fiercely it was hard to say where its source was. In the center, where nothing had been before, was a collection of moving figures. They were all women, I think, pale and clothed in white tulle and silk that glittered in the oddly brilliant beams of the spotlights. There were eleven of them in a wide, ever-moving circle, and in the center danced a twelfth.

There was something off about the way they danced. Their movements were graceful, but the shift from pose to pose was stiff and instantaneous, like a stop-motion film, like they were dolls being bent into shapes. Their arms and legs endured far past bodily restraints, and their spines twisted like worms on a fishhook.

The lead ballerina was another story. She was faster, her body undulating and twisting so quickly that watching made me dizzy. She faced away from us, and all I saw were the muscles in her back rippling as she moved.

I realized then that all the dancers were bleeding. Unlike the white of their costumes, their shoes were a dark red, and something darker seeped from the soles and dripped onto the floor with every step. But still they danced.

And still the music played. I found that I no longer cared where it came from.

I tried to step back, as if I could creep away and pretend that I had never seen any of this, but an old faded board creaked under my feet. It was that echo that doomed the whole affair, it was that echo that stopped my heart and damned my best friend.

The lead ballerina in the center of the circle ceased her movement, her too-long limbs freezing in mid-air before abruptly falling to her side, and her curved back wrenched itself straight, shoulders squared like a soldier's. For a long, terrible moment, she was still as the other dancers continued their haunting routine before her head jerked to the side. If she had possessed eyes, they would have met Emmett's, for I was far enough behind him that he was the only one she saw.

The empty sockets were stretched wide, the eyelids almost gone but still visibly painted with garish stage makeup that streaked up past her eyebrows and down her cheeks like brightly colored tears. Her ivory face seemed to melt and morph with the music, her cheekbones bulging from under her skin as they shrunk and expanded. Her red lips bled into the rest of her face,

stretching into an eerie smile that split the lower half of her jaw from the top, and I was sure that if she had had teeth, they would have been bared in a wolf’s grin.

The circle parted, and the ballerina strode forward, fluid and purposeful as her shoes left blood-soaked footprints on the stage, marking the path that she traveled. I stood still within the wings, as if remaining motionless could persuade the dancers that I was part of the soot-covered curtains, and my heart stumbled in a terrified despair the nearer she came. Emmett, however, though just as rooted to the spot, seemed transfixed, though whether with admiration or fear I couldn’t tell, swaying slightly as she came.

The ballerina took his hands, gently, gracefully, but her iron fingers were quick as they snaked around his wrists and chained him to her as she pulled him towards the circle. He couldn't seem to speak, but her touch stirred him and every time he tried to step away, he inched closer to the ring of contortion. Her nails dug into his skin, piercing the soft flesh of his forearm with ease, and he cried out as blood welled up in the half-moon cuts.

It was at that sound that the ballerina dropped her pretense of coaxing him. Her face twisted into an expression of enraptured glee, and with a flex of her thin wrists, she heaved him past her, thrusting him into the circle with inhuman force. I watched Emmett slide across the blood slick stage, and as he fell roughly to his knees with a gasp, the circle closed around him.

I saw now another thing that had unsettled me about the dancers. Their graying skin was covered in thin, white ribbons, bound at the joints and stained with yellow and red. One dancer’s neck was wrapped in such trimmings, a red smile weeping through; another's arm was bent oddly, the

cracked cross section of a bone jutting out from the elbow. One ballerina had peeled back the bodice of her costume, skin melded to the fabric, revealing a jagged cavity in her side that was filled with an intricate web of gore-touched threads and I felt bile rise in my throat.

Four more melted out of the circle and surged towards him, each seizing one of Emmett's limbs in a damp, icy grip, the coarse palms of the dancers scraping his wrists and ankles raw as he thrashed. They held him there as he struggled, splayed open like the decorative corpse of a butterfly. The theater lights and the fear in his cries pricked the backs of my own eyes with tears, and I heard a horrified sob escaped him as bloodied pointe shoes glided across the wooden stage once more.

Still, the others danced and still, the music played.

The lead ballerina approached, standing over him. She stood motionless for a moment there, watching him writhe in the deadened grip of her accompaniment, and if she had had eyes, they would have been afire with delight. My friend had started to beg, when, in a perfect plié, she swiftly bent down and dug her too-long fingers into his wide, terrified eyes.

I swallowed back my own screams as Emmett's reverberated into the indifferent chambers of the theater, dying before they reached the world.

And still the music played.

I couldn't move as I watched them disassemble Emmett. Perhaps if I had been able to focus on anything other than the guttural cries of my dying

friend or the sound of flesh tearing, I would have been able to discern whether or not the faraway sounds of applause and cheering were real.

It may have become easier to puzzle out, however, when I watched a blood-slick hand thrust itself into his open, screaming mouth, and for a moment he gagged. I suppose at the taste of decaying flesh before his tongue was ripped from the back of his throat, silencing him.

If he weren't dead by the time they slashed his throat and tore out his vocal chords so that one of them could sing, I hope he was gone by the time they ripped out his tendons and sinew to replace the ribbons around their joints.

I don't know how I found the strength to run away, or when I finally did. All I remember is the cracking of limbs torn from their sockets, and the sound of skin peeling away from bone. I remember finding myself outside in the warm night air, stumbling away from the ruins that had consumed my friend, and falling to my knees somewhere down the sidewalk to heave onto the grass.

No one ever found what was left of him.

I don't go by the Marisol Theater anymore if I can help it, and certainly not at night. Sometimes, though, if I'm even awake, I can still hear the faint, almost inaudible song of a crooning violin.

Statement Ends.

And we're still running! Good for me. And good for you, Morgan, you get to keep this statement. Thank God. I think I've recorded it, what, four times by

now? It's horrific. I understand that saying I would rather get torn apart by ballerinas than reread this is what Adriene would call 'disrespectful,' but she is the head of the Foundation, not the police of bad humour. I'm surrounded by *files* all day, what am I supposed to do?

In all honesty, I'm actually surprised by the fact it's taken two whole months to need the tape recorder here. And this statement has a certain gruesomeness that the others don't, despite little follow-up. Mx Lacombe declined an interview, unsurprisingly, and when I sent Cass to ask around, they said that a few townspeople confirmed Emmett was reported missing a few weeks before this statement was giving. The Marisol Theatre is still standing in Dayton, Ohio, presumably with its residents intact.

It's nice to have research assistants again. Magnus gave me a lot of free reign but really, what's the point of having a PhD but to boss around stressed out overachieving twenty-somethings? Builds character.

And I know Mars is technically Archival staff, not Curatorial, but I count them on this because it's as likely that they'll listen to *me* as they'll listen to *anyone.* I say this as if I don't have to listen to anything Frank tells me, but a guy can dream.

Honestly I forgot how much fun it was to talk into a tape recorder. I used to do it all the time as a kid. Record my voice, play it back, take out the cassette… chuck it in the Thames. Like a message in a bottle, but worse. Needless to say my parents stopped buying me cassettes. I had an empty tape recorder in my room for a while, until my sister stepped on it, which I maintain was on *purpose*, but I'm deeply off topic now.

Like I said, there wasn't much follow-up aside from the facts that Cass got from calling around town. And the fact that it won't record digitally. The bloke from Magnus— Matthew? Christ, I am terrible with names, I used to work in the same building as them— said that his boss pays a lot more attention to the statements on the tape recorder, and *he* seemed like he was paying a lot of attention to aforementioned *boss,* so. I'm trusting his word — and the contents of this account, I suppose— that there are… implications here.

That aside, it's been a *wonderful* day. Lovely weather, looks like it's going to snow. I'm sure my husband will enjoy it. They're a winter sort of person.

See? I'm just talking now. It's too tempting. There's no Thames nearby to throw this into, and I absolutely refuse to re-record, so Morgan, you'll be getting this whole thing, rambles and all. So sorry.

End recording.

[Theme plays.]

OUTRO

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[Theme ends.]